

The Birth of the King

We now come to such a familiar story. Caesar Augustus had called for a tax census. Everyone had to go to his own hometown to register with the authorities. No Jew liked paying the Roman tax any more than we particularly like paying taxes today. Yet as Jesus has commanded that we are to render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and as Peter and Paul teach us to humbly submit to our authorities, so Joseph and Mary, as good citizens of the kingdom of man, made the difficult ninety-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem to submit to their rulers.

The Virgin's due date for delivering her child was drawing near. Bethlehem was packed with people and there was no vacancy for the young couple at the local inn. So Mary had to deliver her Child in a dirty cave alongside the smelly animals. The young girl wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth and put him down to sleep in an animal's feeding trough. Later Luke will tell us that another Joseph, along with Mary will once again wrap the body of Jesus in white linen cloths but this time to lay his body in a borrowed tomb (Luke 23:53), thus signifying why Jesus came.

At that very moment the fields of Bethlehem were lit with the glory of God. Angels from heaven appeared to announce the new birth of the Son of God in human flesh. They proclaimed the good news of great joy and praised God who had brought peace to the earth in the form of this tiny infant who is the announced Savior, Christ, and Lord. The King of the whole earth has been born. The shepherds who hear the angels left their flocks in the fields and went running to Bethlehem to see this baby in a manger. They found God wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in a manger. They told Mary and the others what the Angels had said that in the city of David a Savior has been born who is the promised Messiah, the Lord of all. While others were struck by the testimony of the shepherds, the Virgin Mary pondered everything in her heart. The shepherds returned to their work, glorifying God.

The contours of the story are familiar ones. We know most of the lines by heart. The story is retold year after year in the Christmas carols and pageants and displays.

So we do well to follow this young girl who kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Let us once again dwell on this familiar story to see the magnificent gift that was delivered on Christmas Day.

The Covenant of Redemption

The Story really begins before the world was created. Back before the creation of time, matter, and space, when all that existed was the eternal, Triune God dwelling in perfect harmony.

Within the eternal counsel, the Son agreed to become a man in order to reestablish and reorder God's kingdom and through taking upon Himself the judgment of God, He would stand as the New King over God's Kingdom.

Jesus declared to His disciples, "As my Father appointed unto me a kingdom, so I appoint unto you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Lk. 22:29-30).

From the very beginning, God, the Great King, is establishing His Kingdom.

The Creation of the World

God's eternal plans of building a Kingdom begin to materialize at Creation. God lays the foundation of His Kingdom by speaking the world into existence. He plants a Holy Sanctuary, the Garden of Eden, where He might dwell with man. He creates man and names him Adam. He establishes Adam as the King over all mankind and over all the animals. He will represent all creation before God.

In order to test this new King to see if he will be faithful, God, the Great King, places Adam in a crisis situation where he will be tempted to disobey God. Adam fails the test and with him the entire human race and all creation is condemned to death.

Knowing that Adam would fail this probation period, God begins the work of restoration with a promise of the Coming One, a Messiah who will be Lord over all. But this promise didn't begin here for the apostle Peter tells us that even before the foundation of the world that the blood of the spotless Lamb was poured out for his people (1 Pet. 1:19-20). In a very generic promise, God warns the Adversary that the Seed of the woman Eve will one day come and crush his head in victory.

The Promise to Abraham

From that general promise of victory over the enemy of God and his people, God once again speaks a promise to His elect. To Abram, God calls him from his country and promises that he will be a King of a great nation and through one coming from him God would bless all the families of the earth. God establishes an eternal covenant with Abraham promising that God would be His God and Abraham and his people would be the people of God.

In his last days, Jacob (the grandson of Abraham) called all of his sons together for a blessing. To his son Judah, Jacob promised, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." (Gen. 49:10).

The Covenant with David

God gave Israel a land, a nation, a kingdom -- which was ultimately a picture or type of the great Kingdom to come. After she entered the Promised Land, Israel cried out to God for a king. After the failure of King Saul, David arose to the throne. Under King David, Israel flourished as a kingdom and for the first time they began to taste the eternal promise of God.

God comes to David to once again make a promise. He tells David, "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever . . . and your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever." (2 Sam. 7:12-13, 16).

The immediate fulfillment of the promise began to be fulfilled in Solomon, but a greater King was coming. A King who would not fail the Great King.

The Psalms of the King

Throughout the Psalter the promise of this Coming King was frequently pronounced.

In Ps. 2, God declares, "I have set My King on my holy hill in Zion. You are My Son, today I have begotten you. Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and end of the earth for your possession." God promises a King whose plans will not be thwarted by man. The kingdoms of this world will rise against the Promised King only to perish in the way.

In Ps. 110, God once again promises the Lord: "Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of your enemies!" The Promised King's eternal victory is assured because God Himself has promised to establish it.

The Prophecies of the King

Isaiah the Prophet spoke of the Coming King as a great light that shines in the world. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever." (9:6-7)

God, the Great King, is building His Kingdom here on earth. Israel was given many kings and each of them without exception proved lacking. The people of God longed for the fulfillment of the promise of God: A King who would lead God's people and establish them forever in righteousness and covenant faithfulness to God.

The Apostle Paul describes the fulfillment of the Coming King with these words: But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." (Gal. 4:4-5).

The story that is so familiar to us, is the story of the Birth of the Promised King. The people of God finally have the answer from God. God has finally spoken and given His final Word. What began in eternity and promised over thousands of years has become flesh and blood and wrapped in swaddling cloths. The King of the Universe, holding the entire creation by the Word of His power is nestled in the arms of the young teenage virgin.

The whole story seems unbelievable. To announce the inauguration of the King of kings and Lord of lords God sends forth the magnificent display of His greatest creation of glory. There is no greater expression of glory than the angelic beings. They gather in all their holy splendor to announce the birth of the King of the ages. But to whom do they give this message? Shepherds! Dirty, smelly, untrustworthy men. God sends forth the King of His people through the womb a young, poor virgin girl and announces the glorious day of good tidings to the lowliest of men out watching over their sheep.

This would anticipate the nature of the King's mission. Rather than coming to flaunt His own power and glory, He comes to lay down His own life as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world.

The angels praise God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" The angels proclaim that the answer of peace and grace has been born. Through the Babe born in the manger God's people now have peace with God. We are finally at rest with God.

Did Mary fully contemplate all these things that she pondered in her heart? Did she understand the eternal plan of God and how God was fulfilling it through her and how He first pronounced it to the Shepherds?

She may not have fully understood all that was going on at the time, but her response along with the Shepherds was simply to praise and glorify God.

As we gather together under the tree, look at the lights and remember how God sent light into the world. Look at the evergreen tree and remember that God sent His Son to bring eternal life. Look at the water that keeps the tree alive and remember that Jesus is the living water that provides eternal life. As you exchange your gifts, ponder the Gift of God lying in a manger, wrapped in cloths. Ponder how the King came to exchange your judgment for His life, your sin for His righteousness.

Amen!

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